“Random dottiness”: Samuel Beckett and the reception of Harold Pinter’s early dramas

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"Random dottiness": Samuel Beckett and the reception of Harold Pinter's early dramas

by Jonathan Bignell

Abstract

This essay analyzes the significance of Samuel Beckett to the British reception of the playwright Harold Pinter's early work. Pinter's first professionally produced play was The Birthday Party*, performed in London in 1958. Newspaper critics strongly criticized it and its run was immediately cancelled. Beckett played an important role in this story, through the association of Pinter's name with a Beckett "brand" which was used in reviews of* The Birthday Party *to sum up what was wrong with Pinter's play. Both Beckett and Pinter signified obscurity, foreignness and perversity. Rather than theatre, it was broadcasting of their dramas that cemented Beckett's and Pinter's public reputations. The BBC Head of Drama, Martin Esslin, backed both writers, and the BBC producer and friend of Beckett's Donald McWhinnie produced Pinter's first broadcast play in 1959. Radio, and later television, helped to establish the canonical roles that Beckett and Pinter would later play.*

This essay analyzes how the relationship between Samuel Beckett's and Harold Pinter's dramatic work was perceived in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain.[1] The essay begins by discussing the premiere London performance of Pinter's first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, which was very negatively reviewed by the theatre critics of the London newspapers. At this time, the critics' power was immense and could turn a theatre production into a dazzling commercial success or make audiences stay away and thus bankrupt its producers. While not all of the reviewers compared Pinter's play with Beckett's work, several of them did, and the reference to Beckett was most often used not to praise Pinter but to condemn him. This paper discusses what reference to Beckett meant at this cultural moment. It goes on to argue that it was broadcasting, mainly on radio but then on television, that lifted both Beckett and Pinter into landmarks in the national drama. The connection between the quixotic theatre culture and this liberal but paternalistic broadcasting support-system was a small group of individuals,

[1] Research for this essay was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/P005039/1) as part of the research project "Pinter Histories and Legacies": http://www.reading.ac.uk/ftt/research/ftt-Harold-Pinter-Histories-and-Legacies.aspx.

working within a powerful discourse of public benefit. While the discourses of theatre professionals struggled for a while to assimilate Pinter's work into a recognized category, and they cast around for comparators, a few important broadcasters quickly stepped up to bring Pinter into a cadre of dramatists where Beckett already belonged. Pinter's work was more accessible to television audiences than Beckett's, and there was an increasing divergence between them as discourses around them solidified in the early 1960s.

"Forget Beckett": Reviews of *The Birthday Party*

The Birthday Party, Pinter's first full-length play, premiered in London on Monday May 19, 1958 at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. This was not the first performance, since the play had been toured to student audiences at Cambridge, and was well-received there and on early visits to Oxford and Wolverhampton. The official Pinter webpage reprints the *Cambridge Review*'s response, which called Pinter "a lively and assimilative new talent" whose play "owes much to Ionesco, whose influence on the British theatre may ultimately prove as insidious as it now seems, to those sated with West End dreariness, promising."[2] This ambivalence continued as *The Birthday Party* was described as both "adroit" but "nihilistic, for no rich areas of significant human experience seem to exist between the sterile level of reality at the opening (cornflakes, fried bread and the stock question 'Is it nice?') and the subsequent gaping horror and claustrophobia of a neurotic's world." One of Oxford's local papers, *The Oxford Mail*, likened the play to the work of Ernest Hemingway and T. S. Eliot in its review, while the *Oxford Times* noted its similarities with the menace and mystery of Kafka.[3] Pinter had already written a short play, *The Room*, commissioned for the opening of the first university drama department in the UK at Bristol University, in May 1957. However, playwriting was an activity he had only recently begun to undertake alongside a moderately successful career as a professional actor. Indeed, it was while Pinter was performing in a touring production of the comedy *Doctor in the House* that he wrote *The Birthday Party*, commissioned by the 27 year-old producer Michael Codron.[4]

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[2] Anon., The Birthday Party, *Cambridge Review*, April 28, 1958, http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays_bdayparty.shtml, accessed November 8, 2017.
[3] Michael Billington, Fighting Talk, *The Guardian*, Books section, May 3, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/03/theatre.stage, accessed November 8, 2017.
[4] Samantha Ellis, The Birthday Party, London 1958, *The Guardian*, April 2, 2003, 4, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/02/theatre.samanthaellis, accessed November 8, 2017. The play *Doctor in the House* was adapted from the eponymous comic novel by Richard Gordon (1952), based on his experiences as a young trainee doctor in London.

The London premiere was produced by Codron and David Hall, and was directed by Peter Wood. Wood already had a reputation in the London theatre, having directed a very successful revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* just before starting work on Pinter's play.[5] From various points of view therefore, the production was affected by some of the uncertainties attending any premiere, but Pinter's long experience as a theatre actor, the recent success of his first short play, *The Room*, and the experienced personnel surrounding the production militated to some degree against these risks. However, in London the newspaper reviewers strongly criticized the play and its run was cancelled after only eight performances.

The play is set on the English coast, in the living room of a boarding-house in a small seaside resort. The house's middle-aged owners – Meg, who runs the business and her husband Petey, a seaside deckchair attendant – let rooms to guests. Two unexpected visitors, Goldberg and McCann, come to the house and terrorize a long-term resident, Stanley, an unemployed concert-party pianist. In the middle of the play, an impromptu birthday party is held for Stanley, and a young woman, Lulu, is assaulted during a party game when all the lights go out. At the end of the play, for reasons that remain obscure, Goldberg and McCann take Stanley away. The play is in three acts, in this single domestic interior setting, with dialogue that appears demotic and desultory, but which hints at powerful and violent emotions that threaten to break through its banal surface.

The critic at *The Daily Telegraph*, William A. Darlington, wrote that having recently been to see performances in Russian at Sadler's Wells theatre, he "had looked forward to hearing some dialogue I could understand. But it turned out to be one of those plays in which an author wallows in symbols and revels in obscurity. […] The author never got down to earth long enough to explain what his play was about, so I can't tell you."[6] Darlington then described the seaside setting and the characters, all of whom except Petey he called "mad," whether from "thwarted maternity" in Meg's case or "nymphomania" in Lulu's. So, the play was being criticized for not having an evident topic or argument, and for the lack of coherent psychology in its characters, whose actions thus seemed irrational. There was action on stage (distinguishing the play from the inaction that had puzzled Beckett's first audiences for *Waiting for Godot*), and Darlington recognized the sinister quality of Goldberg and McCann that would go on to be the play's most remarked feature. But the critic could not assess the significance of the play because he was expecting a message in it that he did not find.

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[5] Billington, Fighting Talk.
[6] William A. Darlington, Mad Meg and Lodger, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 20, 1958.

Milton Shulman of the *Evening Standard* complained that witnessing this play resembled an attempt "to solve a crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal," and he predicted, "It will be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward."[7] He wondered whether it was a comedy but decided that it was "not funny enough." Derek Granger, in the *Financial Times,* wrote: "Harold Pinter's first play comes in the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco and before the flourishing continuance of which one quails in slack-jawed dismay."[8] Granger saw Beckett and Ionesco as reference-points that his readership would recognize, but whom he expected his readers to recoil from. What he most disliked was the sense that the play had no apparent point to make: "The message, the moral, and any possible moments of enjoyment, eluded me. Apart from a seaside ticket-collector and a bare-legged floozy, all the characters seemed to me to be in an advanced state of pottiness or vitamin deficiency, and quite possibly both at once." Granger's was not the only review to compare Pinter to Beckett, and Beckett played an important role in this story not so much by a direct relationship as by the association of Pinter's name with a known Beckett "brand." References to Beckett were explicitly used in reviews of *The Birthday Party* to sum up what was wrong with it. *The Guardian*'s reviewer, identified as "MWW" complained that

> although the author must have explained his play to the cast, he gives no clues to the audience [. . .] What [it all] means, only Mr Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain their actions, thoughts or feelings. If the author can forget Beckett, Ionesco and Simpson, he may do better next time.[9]

Both Beckett and Pinter, at this historical moment, were shorthand for obscurity, foreignness and perversity.[10]

There was a British theatre culture strongly influenced by continental European writing, alternative to the British tradition embodied by Terence Rattigan's or John Whiting's plays, and the major London productions just preceding *The Birthday Party* included Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 and Ionesco's *The Lesson* and *The Bald Prima Donna* in

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[7] Milton Shulman, Sorry Mr Pinter, You're Just Not Funny Enough, *Evening Standard*, May 20, 1958, 6.
[8] Derek Granger, Puzzling Surrealism of *The Birthday Party*, *Financial Times*, May 20, 1958, 3.
[9] MWW, *The Birthday Party*, *The Guardian*, May 21, 1958, 5.
[10] Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*, London, Routledge, 1999, 147.

1956, each written by authors based in Paris. The other key comparator is John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, first performed in 1956, which became the paradigm for gritty, "kitchen sink" drama that featured young, frustrated and entrapped characters in down-at-heel domestic settings. While *The Birthday Party* was not compared explicitly to Osborne's play, Pinter and the other writers later termed the Angry Young Men or the New Wave benefited from an expectation of experiment and challenge.

The other plays that the reviewers of *The Birthday Party* would mainly have seen in 1958 were much like those in which Pinter appeared as a professional actor in a touring theatre company. Agatha Christie's country house murder mystery *The Mouse Trap* opened in 1952 and played to full houses for decades thereafter. In 1956 it was another play set in a well-to-do country house, Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden*, that was the most successful production in London.[11] In 1958 Agatha Christie had two more plays on the London stage, *The Verdict* and *The Unexpected Guest*, both of which dramatized the moral struggle of middle class characters who have to murder invalid spouses to escape domestic entrapment. Structurally, if not in its language and rhythm, Pinter's play looked in some ways like well-crafted plays by Somerset Maugham and Terence Rattigan. It is set in a room and features a household whose family structures, domestic balance of power and relationship with outsiders are used to work through ideas about hierarchies of class, race and gender, and the condition of post-war British society. In 1958, critics were unsure whether Pinter was one of those writers aping the European avant-garde's critique of the communicative potential of language and eschewing moral and psychological pronouncements. But they were also unsure whether the victimization and abduction of Stanley from a grubby boarding-house was a version of the tense, domestic crime story genre, albeit one that lacked either jokes or plot resolution. Pinter's biographer, Michael Billington, sums up the contemporary reactions to the play by calling it "gloriously uncategorizable."[12]

The first performance had been on a Friday, and Pinter read the reviews published the next morning. He and his wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, left London and went to a country village in the Cotswolds. They bought the Sunday newspapers next morning, and fortunately these contained a single enthusiastic review by the influential critic Harold Hobson in the

[11] Lib Taylor, Early Stages: Women Dramatists 1958–68, in T. Griffiths – M. Llewellyn-Jones (eds.), *British and Irish Women Dramatists since 1958*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1993, 9–25.
[12] Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, London, Faber, 2007, 86.

Sunday Times. He had been to the Thursday matinee, where there were seven other people in the audience, one of whom was Pinter himself. Hobson defended the play at length:

> Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London. [...] The influence of unfavourable notices on the box office is enormous: but in lasting effect it is nothing. *Look Back in Anger* and the work of Beckett both received poor notices the morning after production. But that has not prevented these two very different writers, Mr Beckett and Mr Osborne, from being regarded throughout the world as the most important dramatists who now use the English tongue. The early Shaw got bad notices; Ibsen got scandalously bad notices. Mr Pinter is not merely in good company, he is in the very best company.[13]

Hobson credits the play with holding the audience's attention by being "theatrically interesting" because it is "witty" and its "plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first rate." Hobson compares its "atmosphere of delicious, impalpable and hair-raising terror" to Henry James's 1898 story *The Turn of the Screw*: "The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened of them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies."

Radio: The National Theatre of the Air

Further theatre productions of *The Birthday Party* were mounted, and while Pinter remained controversial his reputation grew. But British broadcasting played a key role in supporting both Beckett's and Pinter's work and changing the meanings of their "brands" from elite bamboozlement to widely-recognized cultural reference-points. BBC radio had already commissioned Pinter's first broadcast play *A Slight Ache* before *The Birthday Party*'s disastrous premiere, on the recommendation of Beckett's actor friend Patrick Magee.[14] BBC radio and ITV television were in the vanguard of establishing the canonical roles that Beckett and Pinter would go on to play. The national BBC radio service made Beckett's work accessible beyond a London-based or academic audience constituency. His 1957 play for radio, *All That Fall*, was broadcast before Pinter's *Birthday Party* was staged, and BBC had broadcast a reading of an extract from Beckett's *From An Abandoned Work* in 1957 and radio versions

[13] Harold Hobson, The Screw Turns Again, *Sunday Times,* May 25, 1958, 11.
[14] Hugh Chignell, British Radio Drama and the Avant-garde in the 1950s, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 37:4 (2016), 649–664.

of extracts from his novel *Malone Dies* in 1958. BBC radio adaptations of theatre plays and new commissions for radio occurred throughout both Beckett's and Pinter's careers, enshrining them in a canon of significant twentieth-century playwrights. Ten years earlier, William Haley, Director General of the BBC, sent a memo to the Director of Home Broadcasting. It announced that program policy

> rests on the community being regarded as a broadly based cultural pyramid slowly aspiring upwards. This pyramid is served by three main Programmes, differentiated but over-lapping in levels and interest, each Programme leading on to the other, the listener being induced through the years increasingly to discriminate in favour of the things that are more worth-while. At any given moment, each Programme should be slightly ahead of its public, but never so much as to lose their confidence.[15]

The problem Haley recognized was that the BBC's representation of British society did not coincide with the actual structure of society. While the BBC's pyramid image of taste was a way of expressing aspirational ideals, it misrepresented national taste as it actually existed.

In the 1950s, radio was the dominant domestic media technology. Following the BBC's success in providing relatively impartial news and popular entertainment during the Second World War, the Corporation entered the post-war period with confidence. Britain was changing, with peacetime reconstruction being followed by a consumer boom in the 1950s. Key consumer durables (cars, washing machines, refrigerators) became widely available, and sales of television sets were boosted by the BBC's broadcast of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation in 1953. It became apparent to the BBC hierarchy that British culture was changing rapidly, and there was much discussion of the nature of change, and the proper response of the largest, oldest and most respected broadcasting organization in the world. The BBC changed the character of its radio services in peacetime, introducing the Home Service and Light Programmes in 1945 and the Third Programme in 1946. The Home Service was a general, mass audience channel broadcasting news, drama, entertainment and music. The Light Programme was based around popular music and comedy. The Third Programme was intended to broadcast the best in arts and culture, including opera, classical music and both canonical and newly-commissioned drama, and the Third was where Beckett and Pinter's work appeared.[16]

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[15] William Haley, Home Broadcasting Policy, memo to B. E. Nicolls, Director of Home Broadcasting, March 15, 1948, Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, cited in Ernest Simon, Baron of Wythenshawe, *The BBC from Within*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1953, 80.
[16] Kate Whitehead, *The Third Programme, A Literary History*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1989, 140.

Val Gielgud, Head of Drama at the BBC from 1934 to 1963, pursued a policy that broadcasting should present the classics every few years, regularly putting work by Shakespeare, Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw on radio or television alongside dramatizations of canonical novels by Jane Austen and George Eliot, for example. The stifling of new, experimental or foreign drama that this policy produced was relieved by the creation of the Third Programme, whose output was strongly influenced by the appointment of Donald McWhinnie as Gielgud's deputy in 1953, working with Michael Bakewell and Barbara Bray to commission and produce drama scripts.[17] Later, when Gielgud stepped down, he was replaced by Martin Esslin who had just produced his book on the Absurd which linked and praised Beckett and Pinter.[18] When taken to lunch by Gielgud, Esslin reported that Gielgud told him, "I hate Brecht, I hate Beckett, I hate Pinter. But I know what my duty is. That's why I've appointed you to deal with these people."[19] Bakewell, Bray, Esslin and McWhinnie were supporters of the new drama of the period, especially Beckett and Pinter, with interests in experimental uses of the radio medium,[20] and a significantly different attitude began to prevail after Gielgud retired.

All That Fall was directed by McWhinnie and broadcast on the Third Programme on January 13, 1957, featuring Patrick Magee. The French version of *Endgame*, *Fin de Partie*, was broadcast on May 2, 1957, produced by Bakewell, using the same cast as the Royal Court Theatre's world premiere of the play three weeks previously, including Jean Martin and Roger Blin, with Jacques Brunius as a narrator. Beckett's *Embers* was broadcast on June 24, 1959, directed by McWhinnie, with Magee and Jack MacGowran. Shortly afterwards, on July 29, 1959, BBC broadcast Pinter's first play for radio, *A Slight Ache*, directed by McWhinnie and featuring Maurice Denham, Pinter's wife Vivien Merchant and Pinter himself (under the pseudonym David Baron). Pinter's *A Night Out* was directed by McWhinnie for a Third Programme broadcast of March 1, 1960 and repeated later that month. Beckett's version of the French New Wave writer Robert Pinget's *The Old Tune (La Manivelle)* was produced by Bray and broadcast on August 23, 1960, with Beckett's collaborators Magee and MacGowran

[17] Ibid., 137.
[18] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961.
[19] Chignell, British Radio Drama, 653.
[20] Everett Frost, Fundamental Sounds: Recording Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays, *Theatre Journal*, 43: 3 (1991), 361–376; Jonathan Kalb, The Mediated Quixote: The Radio and Television Plays and *Film*, in J. Pilling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 124–144; Donald McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, London, Faber, 1959.

appearing again. Pinter's *The Dwarfs*, written for radio and produced by Bray, was on December 2 that year. It was BBC radio that first presented Beckett's *Endgame* on May 22, 1962, in a version adapted and produced by Bakewell and a cast that included Maurice Denham and Donald Wolfit. Beckett's *Words and Music*, with music by John Beckett, was produced by Bakewell and featured Magee and Felix Felton. Its first Third Programme broadcast was on November 13, 1962. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was broadcast in an abridged version in a season of programs showcasing the cultural highlights of the 1950s on February 5, 1962, with Andrew Sachs and Nigel Stock, produced by Robin Midgley. Pinter's *The Caretaker* was broadcast in the same season, on April 13, and his play *The Collection* was broadcast a total of three times that year, beginning on June 12, 1962, directed by Cedric Messina and featuring performances by Pinter, Vivien Merchant and Alan Bates. This very distinguished record of Beckett and Pinter on radio continued throughout their lives and beyond, with personnel who comprised a cadre of Britain's finest stage actors, as well as directors and production staff who had privileged relationships with the authors and intimate knowledge of their work.

But during the 1950s the mass audience for radio peaked and fell away, partly due to the rise of television. Changes in BBC policy attempted to address changes in British culture, including discourses about taste and the arts. BBC undertook research into its audiences, not so much to gain quantitative ratings information as to probe the audience's thoughts and desires. The BBC sought to put itself at the center of national life, both reflecting what were seen as the central movements in national politics and culture, and projecting its notion of the ideal form of British society by the selections and omissions of content for its three domestic radio services, and their targeting of particular audience groups. The roles of Pinter and Beckett are in some ways indices that trace the assumptions behind the BBC's intentions, and the contradictions between reflecting society and projecting a vision of the nation beset its executives. A BBC audience report on a reading of Beckett's novel *Molloy* in 1958 demonstrates this problem:

> sharp divisions of opinion characterised the response of the sample audiences, ranging from intense disgust to great admiration and excitement, with a substantial proportion of listeners wavering between the two extremes, several of them confessing themselves uncertain of their critical judgement, reduced almost to incoherence when confronted by Beckett.[21]

[21] BBC, Audience Research Report on *Molloy* and *From An Abandoned Work*, January 14, 1958, Caversham, BBC Written Archives Centre, R/9/7/37.

There were two pressures affecting BBC services. One was the desire to address the whole populace, and thus legitimate the BBC monopoly and fight off commercial radio. This led to increasing anxieties about the loss of youth and working-class audiences during the period, and decisions to provide mass entertainment broadcasting. The other pressure was the commitment to preserve the educative and enlightening policies of the pre-war era when the BBC had been led by its paternalistic and moralistic first Director General, Lord Reith. The Third Programme was envisaged as an elite service which sought to fight against popularization, Americanization and mass culture and to expand the audience for high literary and musical culture in its English and (mainly West) European forms.[22] However, the Third Programme's listenership never reached the 10 per cent share of the national audience that was originally intended.

Television: Room for Pinter

Pinter's first television play was a version of *The Birthday Party* made by Associated-Rediffusion, a commercial television company that broadcast to the London region and contributed to the ITV (Independent Television) channel. ITV was a national network with different companies based in regional areas of the country. These franchise holders supplied programs for their own local audiences and also competed to place programs on the national ITV schedule. While BBC had been broadcasting television since 1936 (interrupted by war from 1939–45), the ITV channel was launched only in 1955 but rapidly became popular for its entertainment programs. However, its remit to produce a full spectrum of genres including original and adapted drama was very similar to BBC's, and the wealthier companies holding regional franchises (like Associated-Rediffusion (A-R), ABC and Granada) were keen to demonstrate their cultural credentials by making prestige drama. A-R's producer Peter Willes read *The Birthday Party* and invited Pinter to meet him, greeting him with the words: "How dare you?" When Pinter looked puzzled by this remark, Willes explained: "I've read your bloody play and I haven't had a wink of sleep for four nights."[23] A-R commissioned a television version of *The Birthday Party* and assigned the highly skilled director Joan Kemp-Welch to the task. She was a former actress and one of the few women directors working in British television, and she made a great success of the play. It was broadcast on the national ITV

[22] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1957, 238–241.
[23] Ellis, The Birthday Party, 4.

network on March 22, 1960, from 9.35-11.05 pm, in the regular series *Play of the Week*, when it was watched by an audience of 11 million.[24]

Both ITV and BBC could draw on a pool of star performers from stage productions, usually in London, for plays that had gained significant public profile through featuring in upmarket broadsheet newspapers and in radio and television arts broadcasting. Stage productions of the plays were seen only by a tiny sector of the British population, but broadcasts – on the BBC's Third Programme on radio, television versions and coverage on late-evening discussion programs (like BBC's *Late Night Line-Up*) as well as fully realized productions of the plays – massively increased the reach of both Pinter's and Beckett's work. Pinter and Beckett were packaged in 1960 among a group of experimental dramatists coming from both the European-influenced avant-garde and also the emerging discourse of gritty British realism. The BBC planned to produce Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Doris Lessing's *The Truth about Billy Newton*, M.F. Simpson's *One Way Pendulum* and Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* in their upcoming schedule of drama production that year.[25] Each of these was a theatre play that would be adapted for television.

Using theatre authors and adapting theatre texts provided readily available television material that had already been proven in either subsidized theatre, London's West End theatre or popular touring repertory theatre. This rationale underlay the television broadcast of both "classics" from the British theatre canon (by Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde, for example) and also "middlebrow" plays like murder mysteries. It was only later in the 1960s that BBC forged a successful relationship with Pinter for screen versions of his plays, which appeared in its established drama series such as *Theatre 625* or *Theatre Night* on the minority channel BBC2. Until 1965 it was on the commercial ITV channel, rather than BBC, that Pinter's theatre work was produced. The *Television Playhouse* series showed Pinter's *The Room*, made by the ITV franchise holder for northern England, Granada, and screened on October 5, 1961. Pinter's *The Collection* was another A-R production for ITV, broadcast on May 11, 1961, and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* was produced by Granada and shown on ITV on August 10, 1961. When A-R screened *The Lover* on ITV on March 28, 1963 the dramatization won the Prix Italia international prize for television drama. Pinter's *A Night Out* was screened by another ITV company, ABC, for its *Armchair Theatre* episode of April 24, 1964. Pinter's work became relatively familiar to ITV's national audience.

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[24] Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 110.
[25] Jonathan Bignell, *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009, 129.

The new ITV channel had been immediately successful at drawing and holding larger shares of the popular audience than BBC and it was in entertainment (rather than original authored drama) that ITV had the lead. ITV captured each of the top ten positions in the audience ratings nearly every week in the late 1950s and 1960s. One justification for the BBC's role, and to some extent an excuse for its poor audience ratings, was that the BBC provided patronage for drama writers, supplied difficult and experimental dramatic work for a small but socially powerful niche audience, and protected the national heritage of theatrical excellence. For ITV to beat BBC, partly though screening Pinter's work on *Play of the Week* and *Television Playhouse*, was politically advantageous for the commercial network because it was repeatedly criticized for screening too many undemanding programs like quiz shows and imported Western series. The commissioning of original dramas by Pinter, Beckett and other theatre writers, and adaptations of their theatre plays, advertized theatre itself and supported it as a national cultural institution.

BBC's first television production of Beckett's work was *Waiting for Godot* on Monday June 26, 1961, and an Audience Report was produced.[26] It attracted only 5 per cent of the UK population, compared to 22 per cent of the population who were watching ITV instead. The Reaction Index for the play (a measure of appreciation scored out of 100) was 32, well below the average of 66 for plays transmitted from London in the first quarter of 1961. The BBC audience survey quoted some of the viewers' opinions of the play: "the whole thing was much too abstract for my taste" and "a lot of fatuous nonsense," for example. One viewer declared "I'm no Royal Courtier praising the Emperor's new clothes," clearly aware of Beckett's significance as a theatre dramatist and making reference to the Royal Court Theatre's reputation for introducing British social realism and European drama to London audiences. Unlike Beckett's, Pinter's work could be assimilated as drama about entrapping domesticity, a form deriving from the Naturalistic style of 1950s British theatre that became dominant in television drama's mise-en-scene.[27] Beckett's plays were still framed in 1961 as abstract and obscure, but by this time Pinter's work on ITV television had gained a popular audience that Beckett's never achieved.

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[27] Raymond Williams, *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974, 56.

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